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**A New Pyramid Scheme for Your Volunteer Department**

*By Tiger Schmittendorf*

*Reprinted from the* [*NVFC Dispatch*](https://www.nvfc.org)

One of the biggest challenges faced by today’s emergency services managers is people. Not enough people to respond, not enough people to serve on committees, not enough people to take on added responsibilities, and not enough people to do all the jobs that need to get done.

The biggest challenge faced by today’s volunteer firefighter or EMS provider is time. Not enough time with the spouse and kids, not enough time to devote to our careers, and not enough time to do what we love to do: volunteer.

The volunteer’s challenge thus becomes the volunteer manager’s challenge. Inasmuch as the fire department struggles to be everything it was to the community 20 or 30 years ago, few individual volunteers have the time to be everything they once were to the fire department.

For over 200 years, the fire department has always been the go-to guys and gals for virtually everything our customers could dream up to challenge us with. If you needed your flooded basement pumped out, who do you call? If a storm knocks down a tree and it blocks the roadway, it’s the fire department that gets called to remove the hazard. Who do even the police call when they can’t handle a situation? When the power goes out and the traffic signals are dark at every intersection in your town, the police call on the fire department to fill in and take over until power and order are restored.

In addition to being the “Jacks-of-all-trades” in natural and man-made emergencies, the fire department was once the social epicenter of the community. The firehouse is where your kids go to Boy or Girl Scout meetings. It’s where the community comes to vote, and it’s where they gather to demonstrate their support for another community member who has fallen on hard times. And it’s the place your friends and neighbors go to on Friday nights for a Lenten Fish Fry or just to enjoy a beverage. Our fathers and mothers joined, as did their fathers and mothers. And we joined too.

But things have changed, haven’t they?

The advent of DINKs (Double Income-No Kids) and MWCs (Married with Children), the infiltration of countless activity opportunities, and the influence of and dependency on technology have created a time warp that is working against the volunteer fire service. People have more choices but seemingly less control over their “disposable” free time.

So, how can we get the same job done with the same set of people who have less time to volunteer? The blunt reality is: we can’t any longer. Doing more with less isn’t working.

Ouch. That’s harsh.

**Cutting the Workload**

OK then, what are our options? One option is to cut down on the overall workload to be done. It sounds easy but how do we accomplish it?

Look at the services you provide to your community. Which are mandated, and which are enhanced or “plus” services you’ve tacked on over the years simply because you recognized and fulfilled a need – not because you were asked to.

Which are essential, and which can better be served by another town (fire or other) department better suited to deliver that service? If your manpower situation warrants it, face the hard facts and cut back to delivering only those services for which your municipality contracts and pays for.

For example, if your volunteers are struggling to keep up with the training and response requirements associated with your basic service offering, yet the added burden of specialized rescue training is keeping them from building on their core competencies, you must ask yourself, “Is it time to cut back on the number of services we provide?”

When we volunteers take on a job – being the over-achievers we are – we typically jump in with both feet. Unfortunately, we’ve jumped with both feet into so many jobs that we often spread ourselves too thin. We end up being fair or poor at a lot of things instead of being good at a few.

I’m a firm believer of truly getting into a business – or getting the heck out. However you choose to address a particular task, do it completely. Do it right or don’t do it at all.

[RED FLAG. CAUTION. DANGER-DANGER WILL ROBINSON.]

It’s pretty obvious that employing the option just discussed can be a double-edged sword. Reducing services can lead to reduced public support, financially and morally. Tread cautiously.

Fortunately, there are alternatives.

**Dividing the Workload**

Another option is to attract more people to do smaller jobs individually. In other words, reduce the workload of each volunteer, but utilize a larger total number of volunteers to collectively get the same or more work done. This option doesn’t come without its own set of challenges, though.

First, there’s the small problem of, “Where are we going to find more people?” You might say to yourself, “They’re not exactly breaking down our door to get in now!”

It all starts with a needs analysis. This is an idea that’s not new to traditional businesses, and it’s an idea well covered in recruitment and retention resources like Chief Jack Snook’s “A Breed Apart” program and the *Retention and Recruitment: Challenges and Solutions* guide published jointly by the National Volunteer Fire Council and the U.S. Fire Administration.

What do you need more volunteers for? What specific jobs do you need them to perform and how many volunteers do you need to perform each job function? What type of volunteer is best suited to get the job done? Do you need someone capable of running into burning buildings or someone just as capable of burning the midnight oil balancing your department’s financial books?

An honest needs analysis both quantifies and qualifies your need for more volunteers. It sets the stage for how you structure or re-structure your membership, as well as how you plan to attract the new volunteers you need.

Once you’ve completed the analysis, you then need to create the opportunities for more people to volunteer. Your challenge is to create a work environment where people are allowed to work within their comfort zone – to specialize. We must diversify to survive!

**The New Pyramid Scheme**

With this in mind, I encourage you to subscribe to my “new pyramid scheme” theory. But this is not your typical pyramid scheme. It’s no scam and it’s certainly no get-rich-quick scheme.

To explain this theory, I will use myself as an example. I don’t change the oil in my own car, so why would you want me responsible for maintaining the mechanical needs of a quarter million-dollar piece of fire apparatus? It doesn’t make sense. It still needs to get done, it’s just that I’m not the right person for the job. It’s not that I’m not capable; it’s just not my forte.

But I do have my own comfort zone – my own set of talents or specialties. I can write, I can use a computer, and I’m one of a few people who are comfortable in front of a camera articulating the needs of my department and the community in an emergency.

A former fire chief who was not as comfortable in front of a camera or microphone as I am appointed me as Public Information Officer, trusting me to deliver an accurate portrayal of the given situation and to promote our department in the proper light.

As a good manager, he let me work within my comfort zone and, as a result, I strived to do a good job for him and the department. His challenge, and that of every other fire service leader, was to identify each of our strengths and weaknesses and to leverage us to the best of our given set of talents.

Let me take this concept one step further. To those departments who require/force new volunteers to be certified in everything, and in a short time frame – Firefighter 1 & 2, EMT, Rescue Technician, etc., etc. – I say good luck. While cross training is essential to a certain extent, going overboard can easily overwhelm most volunteers, burning them out prematurely.

I’ve coined a recruitment message that says, “Firefighting isn’t for everyone – but volunteering can be.” Not everyone has to be the person running into a burning building while all the sane people are running out.

We recognize that there’s plenty for everyone to do, both on and behind the scene. It just takes good leadership and good people management.

Thus, my department allows our individual volunteers to specialize, to be good at a few things instead of poor at a lot of things. We’ve opened our membership to offer the ultimate in flexibility. You can join to just do firefighting, EMS only, rescue only, fire police only, or as a [Fire Corps](https://www.firecorps.org) member to serve the department in a non-emergency role for administration and support.

We’ve had what we’ve called corporate or associate, and now Fire Corps, members since 1990. Coordinated by the [National Volunteer Fire Council](https://www.nvfc.org/), the Fire Corps program allows us to attract quality people to help us run the business of delivering emergency services to our community. Fire Corps is for people who physically can’t or don’t have an interest in providing the hands-on services of the fire department – it’s not in their comfort zone. It’s for people who bring time and talents to the fire department that we may not currently possess.

Our Fire Corps members help us by promoting fire prevention, maintaining our web site, taking photos, writing grants, mentoring our youth, providing administrative and clerical support, public relations, equipment and apparatus maintenance, fundraising, canteen services, typing reports, answering phone calls, managing records, landscaping, and facilities maintenance, to name a few.

We like to think that from accounting to auto mechanics and everything in between ... if someone has a skill, experience, or just a passion to contribute to our fire company and their community, we offer an opportunity for them to get and stay involved.

Here’s my theory about Fire Corps members. The average active volunteer firefighter wears multiple hats, also serving as social hall manager, fundraiser, mechanic, groundskeeper, director, committee chair, treasurer, secretary, etc. – all the jobs they didn’t sign up for when they signed up to be a firefighter.

If we can bring in one non-emergency (Fire Corps) team member, we can use that person to reduce the average multi-hat wearing firefighter’s work load by 50%. We then educate and encourage our members to give 25% of that time back to their family where it belongs.

By inserting the Fire Corps member into the equation, we’ve just increased our member’s effectiveness as a firefighter to 75% – a net increase of 50% of their value to the fire department. And they get to spend more time doing what they signed up for, and love.

**Balancing the Pyramid**

However, here’s the watch-out-for. Adding more volunteers at the bottom of the typical fire department organizational pyramid can come with a price if not managed properly. While the division of workload is spread across the widening bottom of the pyramid, it causes a shift of management burden to the top of the pyramid.

As I say in my [Top Ten Commandments for Recruitment and Retention](https://firerecruiter.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/top-10-rr-tips.pdf): “Be careful what you wish for. More members equal more help, but it also equates to more people to manage and more personalities and people issues to deal with. However, this can’t deter you from recruiting more.”

In fact, you may have to look at adding more “middle management” just to support, supervise, communicate with, and motivate more “specialists” at the bottom of the organization chart. This middle management may include captains, lieutenants, or platoon leaders.

Before recruiting anyone else, I strongly encourage you to bring in someone from the outside specifically to manage and lead your Fire Corps program. The last thing we want to do is saddle someone already wearing too many hats with another hat to wear. You may even need additional “upper management” with more assistant or deputy chiefs as necessary to maintain effective span of control.

Because, as we’ve learned from our NIMS and Incident Command System training, without effective span of control, the result is chaos. In this case, as the bottom of the people pyramid widens, we run the risk of the pyramid imploding if we don’t plan for more volunteers, if we don’t bolster the middle of the chain-of-command. It’s simple; you can only tug on both sides of a wish bone for so long before it snaps.

It’s a division-of-work challenge. We need to recognize and admit that a job that once took 10 volunteers 10 hours a week to accomplish may now require 20 volunteers who only have 5 hours a week to offer. You do the math.

I’m big on balance these days. As a manager in today’s emergency services community, your challenge, should you decide to accept it, is to educate and empower your volunteers to achieve better balance at home, work, play, school, and the firehouse.

This balancing act is based on another equation in my Top 10 Commandments that says, “Peace at home = peace at the firehouse.” No easy task by any means, but necessary nonetheless to survive and prosper in today’s time competitive environment.

As I stated earlier, few volunteer fire departments today can continue to be everything they once were to the community, and few volunteers can afford the time to be everything they once were to the fire department.

I realize that embracing the Fire Corps concept may require a significant cultural shift in our attitude towards perceived “outsiders,” but I believe that the potential for success far outweigh the detractors.

Simply put, it’s my belief that the survival and success of the volunteer fire service relies on our ability to create more opportunities – for more people – to volunteer less time. That’s a forecast I wrote 17 years ago, and it has never been more true than it is today.

Our success depends upon our ability to effectively plan for, lead, and manage volunteers, whether you don’t have enough – or you have more than you can handle. The possibilities for their involvement are only limited by our imagination.

*Tiger Schmittendorf is vice president of strategic services for First Arriving, a full-service marketing team supporting the public safety community. He served the Erie County Department of Homeland Security & Emergency Services (Buffalo, NY) for more than 20 years before retiring as deputy fire coordinator in January 2018. There he was responsible for the recruitment, training, and mutual aid operations of the county’s 97 fire departments and 6,000+ firefighters. He created a recruitment effort that doubled his own fire department’s membership and helped net thousands of new volunteers countywide. A frequent presenter on leadership, incident management, connecting generations, and recruitment and retention, he is a nationally-certified fire instructor and has been a firefighter since 1980. Connect with him at* [*tiger@firstarriving.com*](mailto:tiger@firstarriving.com)